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# **The American Experiment**

**By Neil Postman**

All children enter school as question marks, and leave as periods. It is an old saying but still useful in thinking about how schooling is normally conducted. It is also applicable, in various forms, to other situations and institutions. For example, we might say all nations begin as question marks and end as exclamation points. This must have been the way some Florida patriots were thinking when they made it obligatory for schools to teach that America is superior to all other countries. Someone obviously feels that the American Creed is an exclamation point, a finished product, and a settled issue. But this version of the meaning of America, assuming anyone could actually believe it, leads directly to the kind of blindness that Jacob Bronowski warned against [in *The Ascent of Man*]. Even worse, it gives dogmatism a bad name. Every school save those ripped asunder by separatist ideology tries to tell a story about America so that students will feel a sense of national pride. Students deserve that and their parents expect it. The question is, how to do this and yet avoid indifference, on the one hand, and a psychopathic nationalism, on the other.

As it happens, there is such a story available to us. It has the virtues of being largely true, of explaining our past including our mistakes, of inviting participation in the present, of offering hope for the future. It is a story that does not require the belief that America is superior to all others, only that it is unique, youthful,

admirable, and opened wide to unfulfilled humane possibilities. No student can ask more of his or her country. No school can offer more.

I propose, then, the story of America as an experiment, a perpetual and fascinating question mark. The story includes the experience of those who lived here before the European invasion, and of those Europeans who provided the invaders with both their troubles and their ideas. After all, every story has a prologue. But the story properly begins, as Abraham Lincoln saw it, with a series of stunning and dangerous questions. Is it possible to have a government of the people, for the people, and by the people? And who are the people anyway? And how shall they proceed in governing themselves? And how shall we protect individuals from the power of the people? And why should we do all this in the first place?

Any reader ... will know of these questions, and many more. It is not my intention to give a history lesson. My intention is to make the point that these questions are still unanswered. And will always remain so. The American Constitution is not a catechism but a hypothesis. It is less the law of the land than an expression of the lay of the land as it has been understood by various people at different times. I have before me a book, *The Culture of Disbelief* by Stephen L. Carter, a law professor at Yale University. He is arguing with those who think they know what is meant by the phrase, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." He claims that the purpose of the phrase is to protect religion from the state, not the state from religion, as so many seem to think. Yesterday (June 29, 1994) *The New York Times* carried on its first page an account of a Supreme Court decision on this very matter, in which, in effect, six judges disagreed with Mr. Carter, three agreed. Maybe next time the score will be different. Scores

are important but not as important as the process that produces them, a point of view which should surprise no one since America was the first nation to be argued into existence. The Declaration of Independence is an argument, and was composed as such. Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* is an argument, and, in fact, one with serious flaws. (Not nearly as cogent an argument, I've always thought, as the argument, by Edmund Burke, it was intended to refute).

All Supreme Court decisions are arguments including some deeply embarrassing ones, e.g., the Dred Scott decision. Which calls to mind the Lincoln-Douglas debates, our most well-known and possibly our most skillfully crafted arguments. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that all our arguments have been made by people of the quality of Jefferson, Paine, and Lincoln. The idea, from the beginning, was to allow everyone to participate in the arguments, provided that they were not slaves, women, or excessively poor (although it is hard to imagine how anyone could have been poorer than Tom Paine). Through argument (or more precisely, the cessation of argument) slaves were admitted, and their progeny are now among our most vigorous arguers. Then women. Then the poor. More recently, students and homosexuals and even, God help us, radio talk-show hosts. Our history allows us to claim that the basic question posed by the American experiment is, can a nation be formed, maintained, and preserved on the principle of continuous argumentation? The emphasis is as much on "continuous" as on "argumentation." We know what happens when argument ceases. Blood happens. As in our Civil War, when we stopped arguing with each other; or several other wars, when we stopped arguing with other people; or a war or two when, perhaps, no argument was possible. Of course, all the arguments have a theme which is made manifest in a series of questions: What is freedom? What are its

limits? What is a human being? What are the obligations of citizenship? What is meant by democracy? And so on. Happily, Americans are neither the only nor the first people to argue these questions, which means we have found answers, and may continue to find them, in the analects of Confucius, the commandments of Moses, the dialogues of Plato, the aphorisms of Jesus, the instructions of the Koran, the speeches of Milton, the plays of Shakespeare, the essays of Voltaire, the prophecies of Hegel, the manifestos of Marx, the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., and any other source where such questions have been seriously addressed. But which ones are the right answers? We don't know. There's the rub, and the beauty and the value of the story. So we argue and experiment and complain, and grieve, and rejoice, and argue some more. Without end. Which means that in this story we need conceal nothing from ourselves, no shame need endure forever, no accomplishment merits excessive pride. All is fluid and subject to change, to better arguments, to the results of future experiments.

This, it seems to me, is a fine and noble story to offer as a reason for schooling: to provide our youth with the knowledge and will to participate in the great experiment; to teach them how to argue, and to help them discover what questions are worth arguing about; and, of course, to make sure they know what happens when arguments cease. No one is excluded from the story. Every group has made good arguments, and bad ones. All points of view are admissible. The only thing we have to fear is that someone will insist on putting in an exclamation point when we are not yet finished. Like in Florida.

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